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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 HAVANA 000009

NOFORN
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STATE FOR WHA/CCA AND WHA/PD
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/20/2019
TAGS: PREL, PHUM, PGOV, SMIG, CU
SUBJECT: U.S.- CUBA CHILL EXAGGERATED, BUT OLD WAYS
THREATEN PROGRESS

REF: A. REF A HAVANA 639 ("A SPLENDID LITTLE VISIT")
B. B HAVANA 772 (CONSULAR VISIT TO JAILED AMCIT)
C. C HAVANA 763 (CUBA PASSES UP ON REFORMS)
D. D HAVANA 739 (STRIDENT PROTEST)
E. E HAVANA 736 (HUMAN RIGHTS MARCHES TURN VIOLENT)
F. F HAVANA 755 (CUBAN FEATHERS RUFFLED BY USCG
RESCUE)

HAVANA 00000009 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Joaquin F. Monserrate for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

1. (S/NF) SUMMARY. Over the course of the last month the tone coming out of Havana seems a regression to the hostile language that kept U.S. - Cuba relations on ice for much of the last 50 years. The U.S. press is playing it that way, and both U.S. and Cuban observers are publicly throwing their hands up in the air in frustration. The reality is far more complex, and possibly less pessimistic. The most vitriolic language was the result of Cuba's, and more specifically Fidel Castro's, sense of humiliation at being excluded from the negotiating table at Copenhagen. The GOC would like nothing more than to firewall its civil society from foreigners, but its grumblings over U.S. observance of Human Rights Day were par for the course. Much more threatening to the regime are our overtures to and complaints of mistreatment of bloggers, a group that frustrates and scares the GOC like no other. The arrest of an Amcit, publicly denounced by President Raul Castro, remains a wild card that could further complicate progress. The GOC remains interested in improving relations and extracting what benefits it can but harbors no unrealistic expectations about a radical shift in U.S. policy. That interest wanes and is subject to the whims of Cuba's rulers. This gerontocracy would rather abandon improved relations if it feels its political authority undermined. END SUMMARY.

HEATED WORDS OVER CLIMATE CHANGE

2. (S/NF) The language coming out of Havana after the Climate Summit was as incendiary as it has been over the last year and a half. Communist Party boss and former President Fidel Castro railed about the U.S. "deceit" and "arrogance" and his Foreign Minister, upon his return from Copenhagen, duly repeated the charges at a press conference (Septel). The atmosphere became so charged, that retired General Barry McCaffrey called off a 2010 visit to Cuba in disgust over the "shallow and vitriolic" language that "made the Cuban leadership appear non-serious, polemical amateurs." The head of the National Assembly, Ricardo Alarcon, said that he had given up too, and did not expect "big changes in the near future." The international press was quick to declare that the U.S.-Cuba "honeymoon" was over.

VERBAL WARMING A STAND-ALONE ISSUE

3. (S/NF) Other Cuban leaders and the official media, however, have refrained from regurgitating, as they often do, the vitriolic language of the elder Castro. Many interlocutors, both foreign and Cuban, believe that Castro's (and by extension his Foreign Minister's) words constitute a stand-alone tantrum, and are not necessarily reflective of the state of relations between Cuba and the U.S. The British and Danes, for instance, were targeted just as fiercely. Castro's topical obsessions are notorious, and climate change is certainly one of them (Septel). Adding insult to injury is the palpable sense of humiliation at seeing the Cuban

Foreign Minister, and wannabe world leader and surrogate Hugo Chavez, excluded from the final negotiations (where Grenada, Mexico and Brazil took part).

THE INFLUENCE OF THE CASTRO GERONTOCRACY

4. (S/NF) The former President is widely blamed in the island for the regime's obstinate refusal to change its old ways.

HAVANA 00000009 002.2 OF 003

According to many of our contacts, the political and policy paralysis in Cuba is a reflection of the sway that Castro and his generation of "historicos" (including his brother and current President Raul) have over the GOC. According to a Spanish colleague, Fidel Castro's word is final on the fate of Cuba's political prisoners and the Spanish had a hard time overcoming Castro's reluctance to release an ailing 60-year old inmate last fall (Ref A). His aim, the Spaniard claims, is to seek the release of the five Cuban spies in U.S. jails.

The GOC thus far has refrained publicly from linking the five Cuban spies to the release of an Amcit detained on December 5 (Ref B).

EXPLAINING THE ARREST

5. (S/NF) President Raul Castro himself was the first Cuban official to have acknowledged the arrest. (The only other public statement by officials or in the official press was a January 6 remark about his treatment by National Assembly President Alarcon in response to questions from the press.) Theories about the arrest abound, from an attempt to force high-level attention from Washington a la North Korea, to a move to counter the blogger movement (see paragraph 7). However, at his National Assembly speech on December 20, President Castro linked the detention to U.S. democracy programs on the island, deriding the very notion of a Cuban "civil society" (Ref C). Whether that was Castro's intent or not, the arrest has chilled the atmosphere for democracy programs in Cuba, especially those that hinged on unfettered and hassle-free travel to the island. Thus, the arrest has already served the interests of the authoritarian ruling class. It is not clear how the GOC intends to exact more mileage from the arrest, but if theories about the elder Castro are accurate, he could throw a gigantic wrench in the relationship if he insists on holding the man as a bargaining chip.

OBJECTIONS OVER HUMAN RIGHTS

6. (S/NF) A third oft-cited example of a deteriorating climate was the GOC complaints about the diplomatic presence at the Human Rights Day marches where peaceful protesters

were assaulted by state-organized mobs (Ref D, E). Although the GOC would prefer that the international community stay away from civil society engagement, and sometimes it tries to bully nations into silence, it has grown accustomed to the U.S. and other countries observing these events. It could hardly claim surprise when we did, and its "complaints" were delivered in a matter-of-fact manner that belied its purported ire.

BLOGGER BOGEYMAN

7. (S/NF) The conventional wisdom in Havana is that GOC sees the bloggers as its most serious challenge, and one that it has trouble containing in the way that it has dealt with traditional opposition groups. The "old guard" dissidents mostly have been isolated from the rest of the island. The GOC doesn't pay much attention to their articles or manifestos because they have no island-wide resonance and limited international heft. For a while, ignoring the bloggers too seemed to work. But the bloggers' mushrooming international popularity and their ability to stay one tech-step ahead of the authorities are causing serious headaches in the regime. The attention that the United States bestowed on superstar blogger Yoani Sanchez, first by publicly complaining when she was detained and roughed up and later by having the President respond to her questions, further fanned the fears that the blogger problem had gotten out of control.

OPPORTUNITIES TO WORSEN RELATIONS NOT TAKEN

HAVANA 00000009 003.2 OF 003

8. (S/NF) Despite the challenges to the GOC's authority, its economic mismanagement and its unwillingness to adapt with the times, the GOC remains confident and in control. A less hostile United States has helped allay real or imaginary fears that the regime will come under fire if it retreats from the dogmatic stance of years past. President Castro acknowledged in December that domestic change was needed, but asked for more time for consultations. And, despite his criticism of U.S. democracy programs, he again called for improved relations (Ref C).

9. (S/NF) Moreover, thus far, Cuba has refrained from going on the warpath. Aside from President Castro's remarks, it has not turned the Amcit's arrest into an issue of public debate, or taken the elder Castro's hostile route. On at least two recent occasions, the GOC has passed up opportunities to heighten hostilities. In November and again this January, the GOC complained about U.S. policies without resorting to hyperbolic language.

10. (S/NF) In December, the GOC complained about maritime and airspace incursions (Ref F). Interior Ministry officials were genuinely incensed at the Coast Guard rescuing of the American crew of a sailboat that ran aground on alleged Cuban waters, but in the weeks since the early December incident, cooperation in this area (perhaps, the most effective and closest of U.S.-Cuba engagement) has continued unaffected. Likewise, in January, protestations over new flight screening rules affecting all Cubans did not stop the GOC from granting access to legal teams from the U.S. to depose Cuban witnesses in a TIP case or from continuing to review a full agenda of meetings, including the Migration Talks in February.

RESTRAINT LIKELY, BUT PROGRESS LIMITED

11. (S/NF) The GOC has no reason to eschew the prospect of better relations in the current state of play. However, political control is paramount to the current regime, and it will not hesitate to shut the door if it feels its authority undermined. The key for the United States is to continue promoting reform and greater space for Cubans, while keeping the GOC engaged and interested in areas where it is of benefit to us.

FARRAR

=====CABLE ENDS=====